SUNDAY MUTINY

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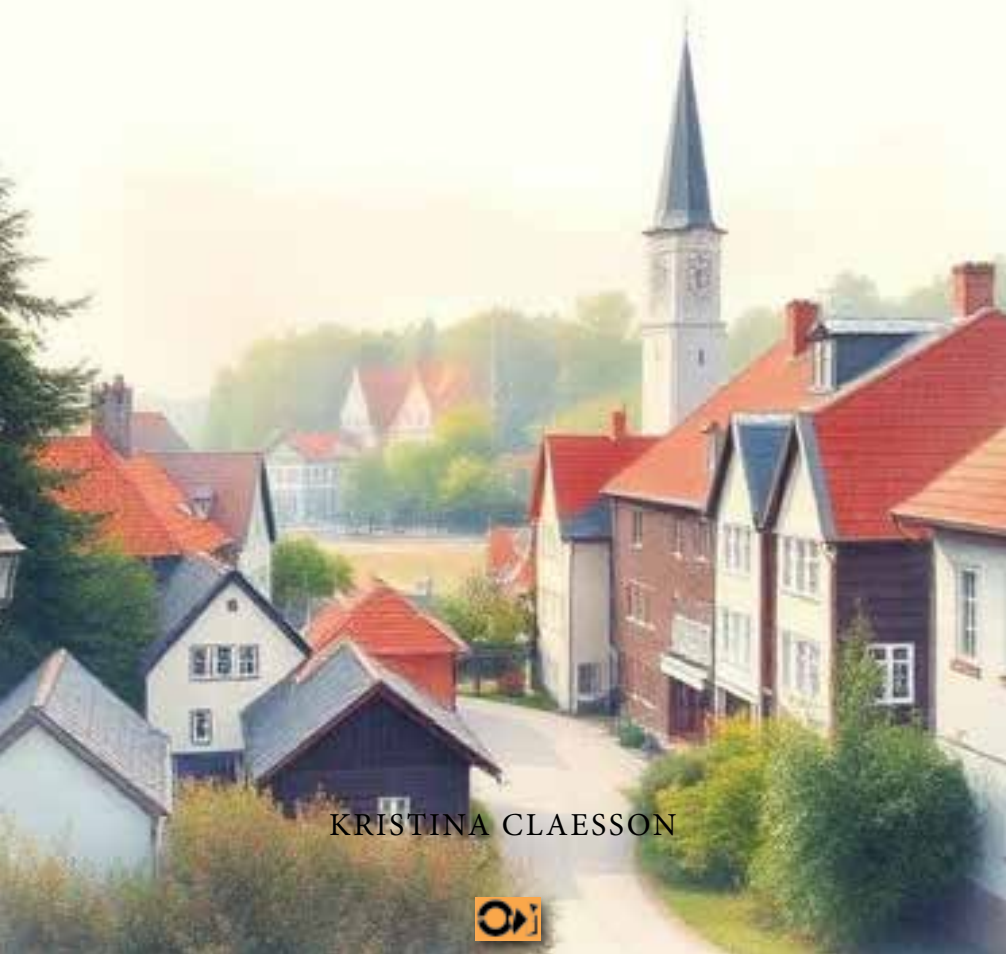

KRISTINA CLAESSON

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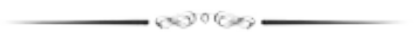
Kristina Claesson

Sunday Mutiny



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The girl was small for nine, with hair the colour of dry straw and eyes that seemed to take in everything while giving nothing back. Her name was Elin, and on the first Sunday of June, she simply did not get dressed for church.

Her mother, Birgitta, stood in the doorway of the bedroom, the starched collar of her good dress cutting into her neck. The house smelled of coffee and the ironed linen that had been laid out since Friday.

"Elin. The car leaves in twenty minutes."

The girl sat on the edge of her bed, still in her nightgown. She was reading a book, something about horses or maybe it was about girls who ran away. It was hard to tell from the doorway.

"I'm not going."

The words were plain. Not angry, not tearful. Just stated, like a fact. The sun was coming through the small window, catching the dust motes that floated in the air, and for a moment Birgitta saw her daughter as a stranger might see her, a stubborn little creature, planted like a stone in the middle of a room, refusing to be moved.

"Elin." Her voice had that tight quality it got when she was trying not to shout. "Put your dress on. We'll be late."

But the girl didn't move. She just sat there, turning a page, as if her mother had said something about the weather. And Birgitta, who had been raised to believe that children obeyed and that church was not optional, felt something give way inside her. Not her resolve, she still meant to get the girl to church—but something else. A small crack in the certainty she had carried like a stone in her pocket for all her adult life.

"I'm not going," Elin repeated, and this time she looked up. "And you can't make me."

Well, that was the thing, wasn't it? You could make a child put on a dress. You could drag a child to the

car. But you couldn't make them do the one thing that mattered, which was to sit still and believe.

The church bells began to ring in the village below, and Birgitta stood in the doorway, the collar still cutting into her neck, and she heard herself say: "Fine. Stay."

She didn't know where the word came from. It seemed to come from somewhere else, from a woman who had not been her a moment before.

"Stay and see what happens."

And then she walked down the stairs, her shoes loud on the wooden steps, and got into the car with her husband, who asked, "Where's Elin?" and Birgitta said, "She's not feeling well," which was not true but was easier.

That Sunday, for the first time in the hundred-year history of the village, a child did not go to church. And the village, which had been quiet for so long it had forgotten what it sounded like to be anything else, began to stir.

* * * * * * * * * * *

By Tuesday, the whole village knew.

It happened like this. Mrs Lundström, who lived across the street and had the best view of the house from her kitchen window, saw Elin playing in the garden at half past ten. "Playing," she reported to her neighbour Mrs Holm later, leaning over the low stone wall with a dishcloth still clutched in her hand, "without a care in the world. No church dress, no Bible. Just running around in her muddy overalls like it was a summer holiday."

Mrs Holm, who possessed a telephone that was connected to three other women in the village, passed this information along with breathless efficiency. By lunchtime, the scandal had travelled the entire length of the coastline. At the local bakery, where people queued to buy their crispbread and cardamom-spiced cinnamon buns, the incident was discussed in hushed, urgent tones over the rattle of paper bags. Down at the harbour, where the old men sat on weathered wooden benches and watched the fishing boats bob against the pier, it was analysed with the grim gravity of a major political crisis.

"They say she just refused," Old Anders muttered, spitting into the grey water. "Just looked her father in the eye and said no."

"I heard she locked herself in her room and wedged a chair under the handle," the blacksmith replied, shaking his head.

"No, no, that's not what I heard at all," chimed in a third, leaning forward on his walking stick. "I heard the mother let her stay. Quite willingly, too."

"Let her? A mother?" The old men exchanged dark, bewildered looks.

The village of Skåre was the kind of place where everyone knew everyone else's business because there was simply nothing else to know. The white beach with its shallow, freezing water stretched along the Baltic coast like a pale ribbon, and the church sat stubbornly at the top of the hill like a black, judgmental finger pointing straight to heaven. It had been the same for generations. The same families lived in the same clapboard houses, the same rituals were observed every Sunday, and nobody questioned any of it because there was nothing else to conceive of.

That was the thing about rituals; they had a way of becoming entirely invisible. Like air, or water. You failed to notice them until something suddenly changed. And now, something had changed irrevocably.

In the Lundström household that evening, the talk at dinner was of nothing else. The smell of fried herring filled the small room.

"A child who refuses church," Mr Lundström said, his fork suspended in mid-air, a piece of potato impaled on the prongs. "What is this world coming to? It's a breakdown of common decency."

His wife, who had been the first to spot Elin in the garden, shook her head righteously as she poured the water. "I don't know what Birgitta was thinking, letting her get away with it. It sets a dreadful example for the other children."

"The mother," said Mr Lundström, with the dismissive disdain of a man who had never had to manage a screaming toddler himself, "must be weak. A firm hand is what's missing over there."

But the mother, Birgitta, was not weak. She was, in fact, discovering something within herself that surprised her. She had initially told the village, at the bakery, at the harbour, to anyone who asked—that Elin had simply been unwell with a fever. But the story had grown legs of its own, and by Wednesday the narrative was no longer that a child had a stomach ache, but that a child had successfully defied her

parents, her community, and her church. And the version that was circulating, Birgitta began to notice, had far less to do with Elin and much more to do with everyone else's anxieties.

What was it about this minor refusal that made people so intensely uncomfortable?

She thought about this while she chopped carrots for dinner, the knife thudding rhythmically against the wooden board. She thought about it while she sat in suffocating silence with her husband, who hadn't spoken to her properly since Sunday morning because he couldn't understand why she hadn't forced the girl into her Sunday best. She thought about it while she lay awake at night, staring at the shadows shifting across the bedroom ceiling.

The truth was that Elin's refusal had opened something. Not a door, exactly, but a small, jagged crack in the monolithic wall of the village. And through that crack, Birgitta could suddenly see things she hadn't noticed in decades.

She saw the way Mrs Holm had to sit up straight through her husband's droning sermons every week, looking proud, even though everyone in the parish knew the pastor had been sleeping with the young

schoolteacher for three years. She saw the way little Jakob Andersson's family had quietly stopped attending services altogether, not out of godlessness, but because the Anderssons were too poor to buy their children decent leather shoes and the public shame of their poverty was worse than the sin of missing church.

Or the way Birgitta herself had been walking up that hill every Sunday morning for thirty-five years without ever once asking herself whether she actually believed a single word of it.

It was remarkable, when you truly thought about it, how much of human life was just routine. Just blind habit. Just doing things today because they had been done yesterday. The village was built on habit, like a heavy house built on shifting sand, perfectly solid until you decided to look too close at the foundation.

On Thursday morning, something entirely unexpected happened. Gunilla, the baker's wife, approached Birgitta by the flour bins. Gunilla was a large, imposing woman with a flour-dusted apron and a face that looked like a loaf of bread that had been left in the oven just a few minutes too long.

"Your Elin," Gunilla said, her voice booming across

the shop, causing a nearby customer to pause. “I heard she openly refused the Lord’s house.”

Birgitta braced herself; tensing her shoulders for the heavy judgment she knew was coming. “She stayed at home, yes,” Birgitta said defensively.

But Gunilla suddenly leaned in over the counter, the smell of warm yeast surrounding them, and her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. “My Ingrid has been asking for two months now if she can stay home. She says the wooden pews are too hard, the sermons are too long, and she doesn’t understand why a loving God wants us to sit shivering for an hour while Pastor Holm talks about tithing and damnation. I never knew what to say to her. I always scolded her.”

Gunilla glanced around the shop thoroughly, ensuring the delivery boy was out of earshot. “But now... now I’m thinking, why shouldn’t the girl stay home? The Lord can hear her prayers just as well from the garden, can’t He? He made the flowers, didn’t He?”

Birgitta stared at her, completely taken aback. “But Gunilla... the village. What will they say?”

“The village,” Gunilla said, with a sudden, fierce

flash in her eyes as she slapped a loaf of bread onto the counter, "can mind its own bloody business for once."

That was the first real breach. The first crack that began to spread.

By Friday afternoon, the atmosphere in Skåre had shifted entirely. There were now three separate families who had quietly decided that their children would not be attending church this coming Sunday. They offered polite, mundane excuses to anyone who asked: they said the children were exhausted from school, or the weekend weather was too beautiful to waste indoors, or the laundry had piled up too high.

But everyone knew the truth. The invisible thread had been snapped. The village was in utter turmoil, and the black church on the hill suddenly didn't look quite so imposing anymore.

* * * * * * * * * *

By Sunday morning, the church was half-empty.

Pastor Holm stood at the elevated wooden pulpit, his knuckles white as he gripped the polished oak railing. His hands were trembling slightly, a subtle vibration he hoped was invisible from the nave, as he

looked out at the sparse congregation. Where there should have been sixty people tightly packed into the narrow pews, there were barely thirty. The silence inside the sanctuary felt different today, not reverent but hollowed out, echoing with the weight of the missing.

The children's pew, usually a row of restless limbs and stifled giggles, was almost entirely empty. Elin's seat was a vacant expanse of dark timber. Gustav's seat was empty. Ingrid's seat was empty. The morning sun streamed through the high, arched windows, illuminating dancing dust motes in the vacant spaces where families should have been sitting in their stiff Sabbath best.

In the back row, Mrs. Andersson leaned heavily toward her husband, her Sunday bonnet rustling sharply as she whispered, "This is what happens when you let the devil into a parish. It starts with one unruly child, and by morning the whole flock is scattered."

Her husband, Peter, whose boots were usually caked with the red clay of his farm but had been scrubbed clean for the occasion, did not look at her. He merely shrugged, his eyes fixed on a patch of bright sunlight on the floorboards. He was thinking

about his untended garden, the warmth of the June sun on his neck, and the decades of quiet Sundays he had traded away simply because it was expected of him. “Maybe the devil has less to do with it than the weather, Martha,” he muttered under his breath. “It’s a fine day to be alive anywhere but here.”

The sermon, when it finally came, was a desperate defence of order. Pastor Holm had planned it late into Saturday night after his disastrous walk down to the harbour. He had paced the floorboards of his study, speaking the harsh words into the oval mirror on his wall, feeling the reassuring weight of his own conviction. He had prepared a fortress of language.

But now, standing before the half-empty pews, the words felt like dry husks in his mouth.

“The scripture commands us to walk in obedience!” he proclaimed, his voice echoing uncomfortably against the stone walls. “We must guard against the sin of pride, the quiet arrogance that tells a man he knows better than his Creator, or that a child knows better than her elders!”

He paused, expecting the usual murmurs of agreement, the collective nodding of heads that had sustained his authority for years. Instead, he met a wall

of passive indifference. The fishermen looked at their calloused hands. The weavers stared at the altar cloth. His voice shook on the final cadence, and when he called for the closing hymn, the singing was thin and spiritless, lacking the thunderous conviction of the past.

Mrs. Holm, sitting in her customary position in the very front pew, stared straight ahead at the brass altar cross. She knew about the schoolteacher. Of course she knew. In a village like Skåre, secrets were merely things people chose not to shout from the rooftops. For three years, she had gone through the elaborate motions of the dutiful pastor's wife, smoothing her skirts, hosting the prayer circles, and pretending her life was a testament to holy matrimony. But looking at the empty space beside her today, she found herself wondering why she had ever believed the charade was worth the agony.

The service concluded nearly twenty minutes early. No one, least of all the pastor, wanted to prolong the discomfort of the morning. The heavy oak doors were thrown wide, opening onto a spectacularly bright, warm noon, and the summer sun poured into the vestibule like an unmerited blessing.

Outside, Elin stood on the lower granite steps of

the church. She had not attended the service, her stubborn refusal remained unbroken but her mother had insisted she walk up the hill anyway.

"You will not hide away like a criminal, Elin," her mother had said firmly while tying the apron strings. "It is important to show them you are still part of this community, even if you are an obstinate one."

So there she stood, wearing her faded denim overalls, holding a heavy, cloth-bound book against her chest. She wasn't reading; her attention was fixed on the townspeople as they slowly defiled out of the building.

The reaction to her presence was immediate. Some of the younger mothers gave her small, hesitant smiles from beneath their parasols. Many of the older men looked away entirely, clearing their throats and studying the horizon. The adults walked with the pinched, strained expressions of people who had suddenly been confronted with a truth they had spent a lifetime trying to ignore.

In the midst of the crowd, Mrs. Holm descended the steps. She walked alone, her black silk shawl drawn tightly around her shoulders despite the heat. As she reached the bottom step, she paused directly

in front of the girl. The surrounding crowd seemed to hold its collective breath, expecting a stern reprimand from the parsonage.

Instead, Mrs. Holm stooped down, the silk of her dress rustling against the gravel, until her face was level with the child's. She smelled faintly of lavender and old paper.

"Child," she whispered, her voice low and surprisingly steady, "you have done what no one else in this parish had the courage to attempt. You have made us look at ourselves."

Elin tilted her head, her grey eyes wide and entirely devoid of malice. "Was it a sin, Mrs. Holm? What I did?"

The pastor's wife considered the question. The wind was blowing hard from the western sea, carrying the sharp scent of brine, fish scales, and the distant, raucous cries of the gulls. She looked back up at the church behind them, at the imposing granite walls, the sharp white spire pointing like an accusatory finger toward heaven and then she looked back at the small girl in overalls.

"I do not know," Mrs. Holm said softly, a faint, bit-

tersweet smile touching the corners of her mouth. “But if it was a sin, my dear, it might well have been a good one.”

She straightened her spine, adjusted her shawl, and walked down the path toward the parsonage without looking back, leaving the remaining parishioners staring after her in absolute silence.

What followed over the coming weeks was not a grand riot or a violent revolution. The small village of Skåre did not burn to the ground, nor were there dramatic speeches delivered from the steps of the town hall. What occurred was far more subtle, and in many ways, far more permanent.

People simply began to talk to one another.

They began to speak of things that had been buried beneath generations of rigid tradition. Sitting over coffee in the small kitchen behind the bakery, the baker’s wife confessed to her neighbour that she had never truly believed in the hellfire and brimstone the pastor preached. “I only ever believed in the kindness,” she whispered, wiping a flour-dusted hand on her apron. “I only stayed for the hymns.”

Down at the rocky pier, as they mended the her-

ring nets, a veteran fisherman admitted to his crew that he only endured the cold pews because his wife threatened to lock him out of the house if he stayed home. “I feel closer to God out on the waves than I ever did under that drafty roof,” he muttered, tossing a lead weight into his wooden crate.

Even Pastor Holm, sitting entirely alone in his dark study that Sunday evening, watched the shadows lengthen across his desk and began the first of many agonizingly quiet reckonings with his own hypocrisy.

Elin, the unwitting catalyst of the entire upheaval, went home to her cottage, ate her Sunday dinner of boiled potatoes and salt fish, and went to bed as if it were any other ordinary night. She did not comprehend the quiet revolution she had set in motion, nor did she care to.

But the village, which had been lulled into a deep sleep for generations, had finally begun to wake. The waking was painful, messy, and entirely full of surprises. People argued on street corners, neighbours wept in each other’s parlours, and for the first time in memory, they stopped pretending. They had discovered what Elin realized on the first Sunday of June that sometimes the smallest act of defiance is the very thing that changes everything.

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In the village of Skåre, they still talk about Elin. Some call her the girl who stole their Sunday. Some call her the girl who gave it back. The church is smaller now, and the pews are never full, but the families who attend do so with a new kind of purpose. They have chosen to be there. And that, Elin would later say when she was old enough to understand, was the whole point.

She still doesn't go to church. She reads her books and walks along the shore, and she thinks about the power in saying no. It's a power that never leaves you, once you know how to use it.

The End

Sunday Mutiny

Kristina Claesson

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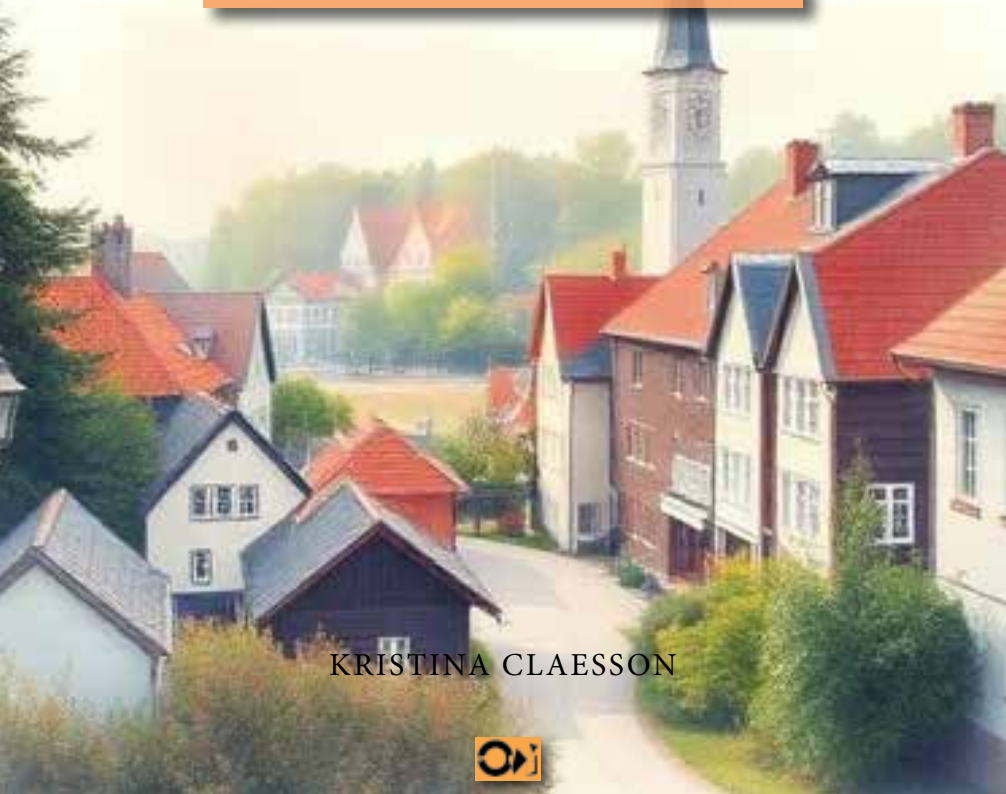
SUNDAY MUTINY

The girl was small for nine, with hair the colour of dry straw and eyes that seemed to take in everything while giving nothing back.

Kristina Claesson, a retired health worker from a sleepy South Swedish town, who dedicates her newfound freedom to chronicling the people and the utterly absurd events that unfold in her otherwise idyllic community in ...English of all choices!



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